

Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 89: The Books of 1, 2, 3 John

General Introduction:

Entering the Books of John is entering history through the incarnation. The Son of God became the very embodiment of God in the flesh--seen, heard, and touched by the author of these epistles.

They are characterized by sharp tones of black and white, with no shades of gray. Things are right or wrong, true or false, good or evil. It is salvation or damnation, Christ or Antichrist, children of God or children of the devil, living in truth or deceived.

Author:

Leaders in the early church assumed that John the Apostle, author of The Gospel of John, also wrote these three letters even though he never identified himself by name. Though it is generally agreed that the same person wrote them all, (vocabulary, style and emphasis are identical) some feel they were not written by John the Apostle, son of Zebedee, but by another John, an elder or overseer of the early church.

The argument for another John goes as follows:

1. An uneducated man (Acts 4:13) could not have written something as complex and profound as these books.
2. A fisherman's son would not have known the high priest as the author John obviously did.
3. An Apostle would not have called himself an elder.
4. The three letters don't follow the pattern on Apostolic letters with introduction, greeting, teaching, and conclusion.

The argument for the Apostle John, however, is stronger and answers these objections:

1. Uneducated did not mean stupid or illiterate. It only meant without formal education in the rabbinical schools, not lack of public or basic Jewish school training. Many fishermen, including Zebedee, were rich owning a fleet of boats and servants to man them (Luke 1:20).
2. Since Zebedee was Jewish and wealthy he and his family probably did know the high priest.
3. Other Apostles referred to themselves by titles other than Apostle. Peter, definitely an Apostle, called himself elder (1 Peter 5:1), and Paul used words like bond-servant or prisoner speaking of himself.
4. Since the three epistles were addressed to no one group in particular and obviously meant to be circulated among the churches, or to individuals, no formal pattern was necessary.

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Furthermore:

1. The author claimed to be a close companion of Christ during His earthly ministry (1:1-4).
2. The very anonymity affirms the early church claims of the Apostle John's authorship. Only one with his well-known status and authority could write with such authority and expect absolute obedience from his readers without fully identifying himself. He also addressed his readers as "dear children" (2:1) and "dear friends" (2:7) indicating sufficient familiarity to claim that relationship.
3. John the Apostle was one of the three intimate associates of Jesus and was, along with Peter and James (Matt. 17), an eyewitness to and full participant in Jesus' earthly ministry (1:1-4).

He walked and talked with Jesus, saw Him heal, heard Him teach, watched Him die, met Him alive again, and saw Him ascend; John experienced the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and in his daily ministry.

John knew Jesus!

In writing the forth Gospel he referred to himself as the disciple "whom Jesus loved," was the one closest to Jesus at the last communion supper, and was entrusted with the care of Mary.

4. If John the elder (another John) is the John mentioned in the Gospel, why is John, the Apostle and son of Zebedee omitted. Leaving him out is not likely since he was a central figure in all the other Gospels.

Every evidence, internal and external, points to John the elder being the same person as John the Apostle, and the author of all four books.

Date:

Since there are no clear historical references in these letters, no precise date is possible. Traditional church writings by a multitude of historians and church Fathers indicate that the Apostle John spent a significant part of his advanced years and later ministry in Ephesus carrying out a wide evangelistic ministry, overseeing many churches, and conducting an extensive writing ministry.

Again, church records place them in the latter part of the first century, and they were most likely written soon after the Gospel and before the persecution under Dalmatian in AD. 95 since that event is not mentioned.

The heresy John combats also seems to reflect the seeds of Gnosticism that began to emerge in the last third of the first century when John was actively involved in church leadership. Considering these factors it is reasonable to date the three letters between AD. 90-95.

Uniqueness of John:

As the last remaining Apostle, John's voice was powerful and important to the first century church. Papias, an early church Father who had direct contact with John, described him as a "living and abiding voice" who was active in the church even though he was very old.

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Many eagerly hung on to every word he said. After all, he was the only man left alive who had first-hand experiential knowledge of Jesus. He was an eyewitness to the ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord.

THE OUTLINE OF THE EPISTLE OF FIRST JOHN

Introduction:

While Paul is characterized by the words faith, hope, and love, John's words of choice are light (6), love (33), and life (15). These three words are woven into the very fabric of his Gospel, and his epistles.

Years before, the Apostle Paul had predicted that false teachers would arise from within the church, saturated with a synergy of philosophy and religious mysticism which would pervert fundamental apostolic teaching (Acts 19-20).

After Paul's fight to release believers from slavery to the law, Gnosticism became the most dangerous heresy in the church over the first three centuries. John took up the gauntlet to fight against this heresy.

The Epistle of First John presents three criteria for testing the profession of alleged teachers and individual believers:

1. Professing Christians need to present righteous behavior (2:3-4).
2. Professing Christians must hold a correct view of Christ (4:3).
3. Professing Christians should demonstrate an attitude of love (4:8).

Those who demonstrate these three traits have eternal life. John, much like James, repeats these three themes several times in this epistle as tests of a living faith, tests to determine the possession of eternal life.

I. WALKING IN THE LIGHT (Chapters 1:1-2:14)

John begins the epistle with a statement of the apostolic message that had been consistently proclaimed throughout the New Testament.

A. Entrance (1:1-1:4)

The way from death to life, from blindness to sight, and from darkness to light is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

1. Proclamation (1:1-2)

These first two verses deal a death-blow to gnosticism: Jesus is not an angel, emanation, or spirit. He was "*in the beginning*" ["already in existence"] at the creation. ***He is God!*** And, John had heard Him, seen Him, handled Him, and witnessed His death. ***He was man!***

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2. Purpose (1:3-4)

John wants to bring his readership into fellowship with himself and other believers (horizontal relationship), and fellowship with *"the Father"* (vertical relationship).

"Fellowship" is the sharing of common purpose and direction aptly illustrated by two fellows in the same ship rowing together. This is the key to true joy that is not dependent on people, places, or circumstances, but on our relationship to Jesus (v 4).

B. Evidences (1:5-2:29)

Right action is the evidence of right relationship. Our fellowship with God and Jesus reveals itself in three ways:

1. Holiness (1:5-2:2)

John began by declaring the divine nature of God. *"God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all"* (v 5). God revealed Himself to us as perfectly pure. Anyone who desires fellowship with Him must walk in obedience to His revealed will.

But, John realistically explained, those who denied ever sinning were deceived, but those who admitted their sin experienced forgiveness and cleansing (8-10).

John wrote these words in order to prevent his readers from committing sin, but knowing men will sin he explains that when they do Christ functions as our advocate in the Father's presence assuring their judicial standing before Him (2:1). The sinlessness of Jesus qualifies Him to be our propitiation (satisfactory substitute sacrifice) and our defender (advocate) in order to satisfy God's offended holiness.

Something in God's nature demanded the propitiation, but something in that same nature was moved by love to provide for payment Himself in the gift of His own Son.

2. Obedience (2:3-6)

The revelation of God's purity and holiness led John to emphasize that obedience to God's commands provides both fellowship with God and the evidence of that fellowship. And for the Gnostics, *"to one who says, 'I have come to know Him' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar . . ."* (v. 4).

Those who want to enjoy true fellowship with God must imitate Christ in love, holiness, and service. *"By this we know we are in Him"* (v. 5). True knowledge comes to maturity in obedience.

3. Love (2:7-14)

John emphasized the importance of a right attitude as an evidence of genuine Christianity. A true believer will love Christian brothers but not the world.

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The new commandment (vv. 7-8) is love as Christ commanded in John 13:34 and 15:12. In one sense it is very old (Lev. 19:18); in another sense it is new in its degree, character and quality.

One's response to this command of love is a clear indication of Christian character (vv. 9-11). In contrast, one who doesn't love others shows he still lives in the darkness of sin rather than the light of God's presence.

John assures his readers that they would receive strength and help from the Word of God to assist them in their spiritual struggles (vv. 12-14).

C. Hindrances (2:15-29)

John urged his readers not to love the pagan self-centered life-style that surrounded them, or allow false teachers to lead them away from the truth and hinder their growth.

1. Worldliness (2:15-17)

"Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." (v. 15). An intense love of the world and stuff tends to force out a love for God. And besides, all of this is passing away and has no eternal value.

2. Deception (2:18-29)

Reading verse 18, it seems John felt the return of Christ was imminent based on the increasing presence of false teachers and the spirit of anti-Christ as he defines it in verse 22.

The amazing thing was that the source of many of these "anti-Christ's" was within the church and among the professing believers (v. 19). The distinctive beliefs of these false teachers included denying the nature of God, and that Jesus was the Christ (v. 22). Many had gone after them (vv. 26-27).

Believers could stand against this false teaching by:

- 1) The anointing of the Holy Spirit provides a capacity to understand spiritual truth (v. 20).
- 2) Personal commitment to the Christian message (vv. 24-25).
- 3) Abiding in Christ, continuing a walk of obedience (vv. 28-29).

Again, right actions demonstrate true Christian commitment.

II. WALKING IN LOVE (Chapters 3:1-5:3)

"See how great a love the father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. . . . and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is."

And what is the result of this prophetic knowledge? *"And everyone who has this hope fixed on him purifies himself, just as He is pure."* Remember prophetic hope always brings a change in life-style.

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A. Hindrances (3:1-4:6)

Even though Jesus came to take away sin (v 5), there are several hindrances to walking in love toward maturity.

1. Sin (3:1-9)

Jesus died to cause us to stop sinning, so a person who makes a practice of sinning should examine themselves to see if they even know Him (v 6). The experience of true conversion renders habitual sinning a moral impossibility. Not that a Christian cannot or will not sin, but he will not practice ongoing sin.

2. Hatred (3:10-24)

The contrast here is between a believer who loves his brother in truth and action, and a professing believer who does not. John presents love as another evidence that *"we have passed from death unto life"* (v. 14), and to point out how serious this is, he equates hatred to murder (v. 15).

God's love was revealed when *He laid down His life for us* (v. 16) and our love is shown when we show kindness and mercy to others (vv. 17-18). If we demonstrate this love we confirm our standing with God and are able to *"have confidence before God"* (v. 21) and assurance that our prayers will be affective (v 22).

3. Error (4:1-6)

John warns about people who claimed to be genuine believers, members of the fellowship, who were in fact teachers of error (an early form of Gnosticism) involving spirits and mystical philosophy.

The early church was much different from ours in that members, and even visitors, could stand up and claim to speak by the Holy Spirit. John provided a clue as to how to tell the false from the true.

The test by which the utterances were to be judged was the acceptance of Jesus Christ as God's incarnate Son (vv. 2-3).

He claims ultimate victory for them *"because greater is He that is in you than he who is in the world"*(v. 4), and *"we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error"* (v. 6).

But, he also indicates that the false teachers would always draw a gullible audience of worldly followers (v. 5-6).

B. Evidences (4:7-5:3)

So, walking in love is difficult, and not without opposition and hindrances, but there are also evidences by which the readers can know they are walking as God wants them to walk.

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1. Source (4:7-16)

Love is supernatural, originating in the divine nature of God and totally permeates his character. God is love (vv. 7-8).

The greatness of His divine love for us leads us to love each other (v. 11), and our practice of love for each other is evidence that God's love for us has been perfected or matured (v. 12-16).

John mentions three evidences of the presence of God's love:

2. Confidence (4:17-18)

This supernatural love provides confidence for the coming day of judgment.

3. Love (4:19-5:1)

This supernatural love leads to genuine love and concern for fellow believers.

4. Obedience (5:2-3)

This supernatural love leads to obeying God's commands.

III. WALKING IN THE LIFE (Chapter 5:4-21)

The process of walking in the light and walking in love results in a life of spiritual faith and practical victory in the physical world.

A. Possession (5:4-13)

What defines the one who possesses this walk?

1. Definition (5:4-5)

"For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world--our faith" (v 4).

"And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God."(v 5)

2. Assurance (5:6-13)

John's opponents would challenge these statements by saying, "So what! Jesus was only a man, and man is sinful and therefore has nothing to do with God. Jesus was a man on whom Christ's spirit came at his baptism and left at his death."

John's answer is, "Who are you going to believe, God or man?"

Then he enters into a tight argument for the deity of Jesus, challenging his readers to consider the evidence and witnesses:

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- 1) The Holy Spirit presented His witness at Jesus' baptism and throughout His life.
- 2) God presented His witness at the baptism (water) as well, by His power throughout His ministry, and by accepting His substitute sacrifice (blood) as sufficient.
- 3) The apostles presented their witness by changed lives, miraculous ministry, and courageous deaths.

The truth to which all these witnesses testify is that eternal life is available only through God's Son Jesus (vv. 11-12), and this is all recorded "*in order that you may know that you have eternal life*" (v. 13).

B. Proof (5:14-21)

There are two major proofs that we are walking right:

1. Prayer (5:14-17)

He hears us and responds to us when we pray according to His will, whether we are requesting something for ourselves or intervening for a brother who is mired in sin.

2. Knowledge (5:18-21)

Unlike the Gnostics, we have a personal, experiential knowledge of God because "*we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we may know Him . . .*" (v. 20).

Lessons:

This is a very practical letter for the church today. There are many people who profess to know God and have fellowship with Him but do not demonstrate that kind of faith at all.

To be sure we have genuine, balanced faith we must:

1. Be obedient to God's Word.
2. Love other believers.
3. Believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who came in the flesh, and died as the substitute sacrifice for our sins.

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THE OUTLINE OF THE EPISTLE OF SECOND JOHN

Introduction:

Truth and love are, perhaps, the most misused words in our language.

It is hard to find anyone, from policeman to politician, from brother to businessman who does not conveniently ignore or conceal facts or use well-chosen words to enhance their position or sell their product.

Lying is accepted, perjury is common, integrity and credibility are on the endangered species list. More and more, as a normal pattern of speech we find ourselves swearing that things we say are true--and no wonder.

And love? What is love anyway? Popular songs, greeting cards, romance novels, epic movies, and media counselors bombard us with dreams of ethereal states of bliss, emotional sensational feelings, and eternal super relationships. It is no surprise that divorce rates are high--who can ever live up to that ideal?

Truth is a complete life-style of honesty, integrity, and credibility. Love is an ongoing selfless giving, caring, sharing, even dying. **Truth and Love are the very antithesis of our society's prevailing values!**

Christ is, therefore, the antithesis of those values as well because *He is truth and love embodied in a person.* What does that mean? All who claim to be loyal followers of Jesus must be committed to the ideals of living in truth and acting with love toward other people. ***We have no choice!***

The Apostle John had experienced truth and love "in person" in the person of Jesus. He was so affected that he wrote constantly with these themes in mind. This epistle is no exception as he, I believe, wrote to a close friend and her extended family.

I. COMMENDATION (Verses 1-4)

The feature that unites John with his readers is their common love for the truth (vv. 1-2). He had obviously met some of the children and been impressed with their conduct and commitment to the truth as well. Walking in truth means ordering one's life by the Word of God.

It is interesting that he talks of their commitment to truth before introducing his teaching on love. It is logical, however, since love and truth are inseparable for Christians. Truth must always lead our acts of love and love must always stand the test of truth.

Truth must exist before love can bring people together. This is why knowing where people stand with the Lord determines how close we can become. When someone compromises the truth, true Christian love and unity are impossible.

II. COMMANDMENT (Verses 5-6)

This bond of truth, then, leads to a single request, "*love one another.*" John immediately moves on to an important truth. ***Love is a verb!***

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"... *this is love, that we walk according to His commandments.*" (v. 6) If we love God we will obey Him, and that obedience will lead us to "love our neighbors as ourselves."

III. CAUTION (Verses 7-11)

The false teachers or "deceivers," were the same as those in 1 John.

They accepted the humanity of Jesus but denied His deity. He warned his readers that they could lose the impact and rewards of ministry if they bought into this heresy, since one who erred on this point of truth did not "*have God*" (vv. 8-9).

The heretics had obviously come to these believers asking for a warm welcome and acceptance because of their claim to be fellow believers. Paul warned them not to welcome any who deviated in any way from the doctrine of Christ.

John was not encouraging intolerance for those who disagree with our opinions, but he was demanding total intolerance of those who did not accept the person and work of Jesus.

IV. CONCLUSION (Verses 12-13)

John had many other things to say, but chose to confine himself to this one vital teaching, preferring to deal with other things face to face.

Lesson:

1. False teachers who deny the true deity and humanity of Jesus are to be denied hospitality and any hearing whatsoever.
2. The basis for Christian love and hospitality is a mutual commitment to the truth of God's Word.

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THE OUTLINE OF THE EPISTLE OF THIRD JOHN

Introduction:

Sharon and I have been discussing the fact that we have been having very few people over to our house recently. Do you have that problem? Why? When people come over you feel you must clean the house more than usual, alter family plans and schedules, be charming and attentive, serve creative goodies, and of course, clean up afterwards.

Hospitality costs . . . in convenience, time, energy, and money!

How we treat others is a reflection on our true values. Are people objects, inconveniences, or unique creations of God. John's third letter deals with the dilemma of hospitality.

Where John's second letter was to warn a friend against welcoming false teachers, his third letter condemns the failure to show hospitality to faithful ministers of the Word. Perhaps we can glean a bit from this book.

I. COMMENDATION (Verses 1-8)

Gaius was a faithful and humble man whose reputation for living his faith was well known. John desired that he *"may prosper and be in health, even as his soul prospers"* (v 2) He was faithful in his family and in his fellowship, walking in truth and love.

In other words, his actions reflected his commitment to the Word of God. One of the evidences of this was his hospitality toward traveling ministers even when he did not know them.

John seemed to worry that Diotrephes might lead Gaius to stop showing kindness to traveling believers so he wrote to encourage him to continue.

II. CONDEMNATION (Verses 9-11)

Diotrephes, on the other hand, was a pompous elder (v 9) in the church who had assumed such power that he felt he could even refute the Apostle John, kept a letter John had sent from the congregation, and put his detractors out of the church. John will deal with him when he visits later.

John urged his friend not to be influenced by the bitter spirit of Diotrephes and advised him to choose his examples carefully from those who practice good rather than evil.

III. CONCLUSION (Verses 12-14)

In closing, John commends a man named Demetrius who lives what he professes as witnessed by *"everyone."* Again John deals with only this one issue, hoping to carry on later in person.

Lesson:

1. We should practice hospitality as an outflow of our commitment to truth and love.
2. We should follow the example of people who exhibit traits which prove true commitment to the Lord.